



Temple Beth Sholom

A JEWISH CENTER OF LIFE, LEARNING, AND CONNECTIONS

2625 N. Tustin Avenue • Santa Ana, CA 92705
714-628-4600 • information@tbsoc.com

Rabbi Cohen Sermon Archive

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5771

Rabbi Heidi M. Cohen

Open Your Hands And Feed Those In Need

What's the first morning ritual you have? Personally, I turn the coffeepot on and make a cup of coffee. Later in the morning, have some cereal, maybe some eggs, or the rest of the kids' bagel. Lunch, sometimes, I forget to eat lunch because I'm caught up in so much other stuff I'm doing. Then about mid-way through the afternoon, my stomach grumbles, I get light headed and grumpy, and realize the blood sugar has gone drastically low! Quick! Grab a protein bar or shake! Then it's either dinner with the family or a bowl of cereal after a night meeting. OK, so my eating habits may have a lot to be desired, but these are the habits I choose.

But how many people do not have the choice about their own eating habits or the meals they will serve their family? How many in our community do not have the choice to say, 'you know, I'm not hungry this morning, so I think I won't eat breakfast?'

Today, hunger is a very real problem and it is not going away any time soon. While we have always heard about the issues of hunger in other countries, we forget that hunger is very real right here in our own community, on our streets.

American Jewish World Services reminds us that: "Today, we should live in a world where we never see children begging for bread. God's gift of nourishment has never been greater: there is a surplus of food being produced in the world's fields, more than enough abundance for everyone. And yet nearly one billion people are hungry. Twenty-five thousand people die each day due to malnutrition. Every six seconds a child dies from starvation. More than 60 percent of those who are chronically hungry are women. Global hunger is one of the most pressing challenges facing humans today. But hunger today is not caused by a scarcity of food around the world—after all, there is so much food that extra calories are being turned into things like biofuel. Hunger today is caused by problems in distribution and by the disruption of local food systems. In the past, people ate what grew nearby. But in today's global economy, farmers in developing countries are forced to compete with wealthy, government-subsidized multinational corporations. Local farmers can't profit when their goods are sold alongside mass-produced food which, because it's mass-produced and often subsidized, can be sold at lower prices. Local agricultural systems have collapsed, and indigenous and poor people world wide are struggling to defend their land and water from encroaching international industries."

And while these issues of hunger in our world seem overwhelming, we forget that there is hunger right here in our own community. We see the faces of hunger not only on television, but in the eyes of children who their only hot meal they receive each day is at school. Or those who are on the side of the street asking for help.

When I first began at TBS in 1998, the seventh grade students and I were talking about how we can care for others in our community. One student told how she and her family would keep non-perishable snack or lunch items in their car to give to those who they encountered on the street.

From that day on, I was inspired by what this family did and now in our cars, we too carry non-perishable items to give to those we see on the side of the road when we come to a light.

There was even once when I was out of food in the car and there was a young woman who could not have been more than 20 years old and Yoni said, "Ima, I want to share my cookie with her." We pulled up alongside her, rolled down the front and back window, and I said, "my son wanted to share his cookie with you." She looked at him with such gratitude as Yoni handed her his cookie and I gave her a bottle of water and I knew we touched a life.

Look, the cookies or lunch snacks we give might not fix the world hunger problem, but I do know that even if it is only by one person at a time, we can make a difference in other's lives.

Today, you might notice that the usual pulpit flowers we use for Rosh Hashanah have been replaced by a soup pot filled with food. Why? Today, we begin a new year and today, we begin a

new project together as a congregation. Yes, this is the Social Action sermon time, but please, before you send the letters stating that social action or social justice should not be spoken about at the High Holy Days, I would like to remind us all, that Rosh Hashanah is absolutely the time that we should be talking about how we can fix our world. This is the day commemorating the birthday of the world. This is the day that God said to us, 'you are my partners in continuing the works of creation.' As Pirkei Avot teaches: It is not incumbent upon you to finish the task. Neither are you free to avoid the task.

We are here to be partners with God in continuing the creation and fixing of our world. We are the stewards of this earth and all that inhabit it. Therefore, we have much work to do, yet, we will never complete this work. We are building on the foundation of those who came before us and the next generation will take what we give to them and continue our work. But what kind of world will we leave for them? Who will be hungry? Who will be satisfied? Who will live and who will die?

There are so many, too many, who are hungry in our community. The Talmud tells of the righteous Rav Huna, who, whenever he would eat a meal, would open his door and invite in the hungry, saying, "Whoever is in need, come and eat." His colleague Rava, when told of this, said he would never be able to do that—there were too many people starving in his town. (Ta'anit 20b-21a.) Was Rav Huna able to try to end hunger in his community only because there was less of it? Or was he willing to try despite overwhelming need? Whatever the motivation, his efforts focused on achieving tangible, local results, much like the work of our Social Action committee today.

Our Social Action Committee has been researching and developing ways in which we as a congregation can work within our community to feed those who are hungry. Under the direction of Monica Engel, the committee has worked tirelessly to find ways in which each individual, regardless of age, will be able to contribute toward winning the battle of hunger.

It's not easy to look into the faces of those on the street who are hungry. Too often we make the assumption that they are just looking for a free handout. Or that they just don't want to get a job. But we know, especially today, that this is not the case. There are still so many in our congregational family and community, who are without jobs for no reason other than there are no jobs to be had. I think I can safely assume that each of us know of at least one person who has lost a job over the past two years and faced uncertainty. Unfortunately, that uncertainty still exists and the issues of hunger are prevalent.

From within the Jewish community, we hear these messages from those who have faced hunger:

"My situation became so desperate that I had no money to buy milk for my baby. To give her nourishment, I boiled rice and filled her bottle with the rice water."

"My husband and I are in our late 70's. We stretch our money by eating only two meals a day and, when we feel well enough to go out, having lunch at the senior center."

"I am 65 years old and the caregiver for my 86 year-old mother who has Alzheimer's and is diabetic. When I lost my job, there wasn't enough income to support both of us. I thank God for the help we get from the food pantry."

"When you're hungry, you can't think of anything else."

"My teenaged daughters and I lived in our car after my husband's abuse got so bad we couldn't stay at home. They were embarrassed to go into the food pantry, but we had no choice. Without it, I don't know how we would have eaten."

"When I was diagnosed with AIDS I was still able to work. I'm on disability now, and I depend on Jewish Family Service to deliver my meals twice a week."

These are voices from within our Jewish community and there are thousands of more stories that we don't always hear.

We cannot assume to know the face of hunger. But we can and we should get to know it. We should start to take action to help those who need food, who need us. We read in Psalms: "Open for me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter them and praise God. This is the gateway to God— the righteous shall enter through it." The Rabbis ask: What is meant here by the righteous— who has that kind of access to God? The answer is that in the World to Come, we will be asked: "What was your work?" Those who answer "I fed the hungry" will be told: "This is the gateway to God, enter into it, you who have fed the hungry." (Midrash Tehillim 118:17.)

And while these are difficult financial times, still, a core value of Rosh Hashanah is asking how we might be responsible and accountable for the state of our world.

There is a story told by Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis in her book, *The Committed Life*, where

we see how even those who have nothing find meaning in giving something to one another.

She tells the story of an elderly woman with an old open pocketbook asking for Tzedakah in Borough Park before Rosh Hashanah. Everyone placed money in her bag. Rebbetzin Jungreis noticed that the woman became tired, closed her pocketbook, leaned against a wall and ate some crackers. At that very moment another beggar came down the street, approached the woman who had been begging, and asked for Tzedakah. Jungreis wondered what would happen next and observed that the woman opened her pocketbook, took out a coin and dropped it into the man's hand. Although she herself was a beggar, Rebbetzin Jungreis pointed out that she understood the essence of Tzedakah. Every person, no matter what his or her station in life, and no matter the hard times, must give.

Today, with the start of a New Year, we begin new projects that all of us can and should be involved in. For some, your involvement might be making a donation. For others, your involvement might be serving meals to those in our community. For others, your involvement might be packaging bags and boxes to be distributed to those who need food. For all of us, there is something to do.

This year, the Social Action Community begins a new program called "Mitzvah Meals" and we begin tonight with our annual food drive. Please open the (insert color) pamphlet entitled Mitzvah Meals. Here you will find programs that we at TBS are participating in here in our own community to help fight hunger. There are two hands on opportunities: This year we are continuing to participate in Sunday Nights Together – a program in which TBS and other community agencies commit to feeding dinner to those in the city of Orange. This monthly opportunity is a great way to come together with other TBS families, cook meals together, and then serve those who come into the community center at First Presbyterian Church of Orange.

The second program is a weekly opportunity with the Southwest Community Center. There we will be serving Sunday dinner weekly. Meals will be prepared here at TBS and then transported over and served Sunday afternoon. This will be a great opportunity for our religious school children and families to participate by preparing meals here and then other volunteers taking the food to be distributed in Santa Ana.

Both of these opportunities are such that we get to see and meet those who are hungry and truly touch some lives.

This year, for our annual food drive, which is always such a success because of your commitment, we are asking for very specific items. These items have been carefully considered in such a way that we will be able to prepare balanced and nutritional meals. So I ask that when you prepare your bags for our food drive, please take this list with you and consider providing these items. Let's fill the kitchen again this year with our food donations so that we can truly care for those in need.

And then, please sign up to volunteer by either preparing a meal or serving meals at one or both of the facilities. Let us meet those in our community who need us. I know we can come together as a community to make a difference in so many people's lives.

Finally, we conclude with a prayer – please join me on the back of your Mitzvah Meals flier:

A Prayer for People Living In Hunger Around the World

By Rabbi Shai Held

Avinu she'bashamayim: On this and every day remember your children, created in Your image, who hunger for bread and thirst for water. Take heed of all those who wander in search of food, whose worlds have gone dark through no fault of their own.

We lift up our hands to You for the lives of the myriad children who faint from hunger. Show them mercy and kindness, God, and do not abandon them in their time of despair. Please, God, do not let the righteous want for food.

Because You, God, provide the world with a bounty of food, while we have failed in our responsibility. We have stopped up our ears from the cries of the poor.

Open our eyes, God, so that we see the suffering of the poor; open our ears so that we hear their cries. Remove the calluses from our hearts so that we may pursue the mitzvah of tzedakah more carefully than all others; instill wisdom and courage within us so that we may empower those living

in poverty. Strengthen their hands so that they not be dependent on the gifts or loans of other people, but only on Your full, open, brimming, and generous hand.

Oh God, speedily bring an end to poverty, so that "[the poor] shall not hunger or thirst, hot wind and sun shall not strike them, for Your mercy will guide them to springs of water." Fulfill Your promise to those who revere You, as it is written: "God will wipe the tears away from every face." Then shall we praise You, saying: "God has satisfied the thirsty, filled those who were hungry with all good things."

Amen, and so may it be Your will.

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2625 N. Tustin Ave. Santa Ana, CA 92705
Phone: 714-628-4600 • Fax: 714-628-4619
Email: information@tbsoc.com

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